

Black & White Photography

Here are some points to consider when making black & white (monochrome) digital photographs. This is a personal view and others will have their own, so sift them and take whatever is useful.

Seeing in Black & White

There are a number of methods with which you might be able to 'previsualise' what the colourful world we see might look like when rendered in black & white. No single one will work for everyone, and you may not get on with any of these, so if not, just do it and develop your own technique through practice.

1 *Look through a coloured filter*

Although this will add a strong colour to everything rather than actually make it black & white, it will simplify the colours to a monochromatic palette, and some people find this a 'quick & easy' way to imagine the final image.

2 *Break down the scene into tonal chunks*

Label the different brightnesses or tonal values in the scene according to a black & white tonal scale. One that I use is 'blacks - shadows - midtones - highlights - whites' for example.

These descriptions mean something photographically, and by labelling key parts of the scene you can see whether there is sufficient tonal variation to make an interesting black & white image. This can help to avoid a common problem of very different colours rendering as very similar shades of grey.

(Ansel Adams' zone system is a more complex example of this method for film photography.)

3 *Squint!*

Some people find that screwing up their eyes and peering through them nearly closed reduces definition, and hence aids the ignoring of colours and concentration on tones.

Photographing in Black & White

There are a number of ways to record a black & white photograph; here are a few, there may well be others that work for you.

1 *Set the camera to monochrome, using 'colour settings', picture style' or equivalent menu item*

This is the easiest way, but you are limited to the camera's own method of converting the colour scene to black & white. This only works for jpeg files, RAW format is unaffected by these camera settings. This method does, however, have the advantage of giving a black & white image on the camera monitor.

You could additionally use coloured filters as for black & white film, for more control.

2 *Shoot in colour and convert during post-production*

This gives much more flexibility in how individual colours are ultimately rendered in black & white. For example, yellows can be made lighter during conversion and blues darker, which is roughly equivalent to the film method of using a yellow filter.

Shooting in RAW format gives more data to work with and a potentially better quality result; shooting in jpeg makes the conversion quicker but can result in a slightly reduced quality.

3 *Shoot in RAW + jpeg; set the jpeg to monochrome as above.*

This gives the twin benefits of a monochrome preview on the monitor, and a colour RAW file to convert during processing for maximum flexibility and quality. It is my preferred method, but does require time for post-production and uses more space on the memory card.

4 *Use black & white film*

I guess this is the purists method (and my usual one!), but not so practical for a holiday...

Converting to Black & White During Processing

Most software, apart from some of the free ones, has a 'slider-based' system for managing conversion to monochrome.

By moving sliders representing various primary colours to right or left, the brightness with which that colour renders in the black & white image can be adjusted.

Here is a screenshot from Photoshop:



In this example, the blue and cyan sliders are to the left, making the sky and water darker and more dramatic, along with the red, which darkens the red-brown gravel at the bottom left of the image.

The yellow and green are to the right, rendering the foliage lighter.

There is also a 'tint' checkbox available, which allows the addition of a single colour tone to the image, such as a warm sepia or cool blue, in order to alter the mood of the photograph.

In some software 'split toning' allows different tints to be applied to shadow and highlight areas.

